

Pay Attention to What Has Your Attention

By David Allen

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To most effectively utilize the fundamentals of self-management, it helps to have a reference point for where to start. You won't have to look far, because what usually most needs your attention is what most *has* your attention. Things are on your mind because you are consciously putting your focus on them or because your attention is being grabbed. In the latter case your thinking is being pulled toward something that in some way needs your engagement, and it more than likely is something that needs greater control or perspective to release its hold on your psyche.

Many important things are not on your mind because they don't need to be — they are on “cruise control.” What, then, does that say about the affairs that *are* grabbing your attention? There's something about them that has not been captured, clarified, decided, or handled sufficiently. That inventory of items that are on your mind because they must still be managed appropriately is the grist for the mill for winning at your game.

Identifying what's on your mind is the first step of getting control. You may have already been thinking that making a to-do list is all that I'm referring to, and in a way that's true. But what most people put on those kinds of lists is but a fraction of what they should, to really gain maximum control and perspective. If anything is still on your mind, in the sense of holding your attention hostage, you can still improve your clarity and focus by paying appropriate attention to it.

If you don't pay attention to what has your attention, it will take more of your attention than it deserves. The accumulated amount of mental, psychic, and emotional energy that will be expended on whatever the thought is, over any length of time, will be far greater than would be necessary to either deal with the situation that triggered it or decide not to.

What does it take to truly release the hold these potential distractions have on your mind? Don't consider them distractions, but rather handle them as a ringing phone — a call coming from a situation. If it goes unanswered, it will continue to call. If you do pick it up, however, and then deal with the incoming message sufficiently, it doesn't need to call again. But if you don't pick up the line for the less-than-critical things, the circuit will stay busy and not allow the rest of your inputs to have adequate space.

All of this is to affirm the somewhat counterintuitive notion that, in one respect, everything is equally important. Everything, that is, that grabs your attention. If what you need to be able to manage your life and work is full access to your focus, anytime and all the time, then whatever diminishes that capability should be eliminated. Ignoring it is an option, but not a good one. If it will go away in time, put it away now. If it won't, get it into a trusted system. The good news is that the process of dealing with these blips is identical whether they are large or small. But if you don't accept what's there to begin with, you undermine your effectiveness.

The unique power of the principles in this book can only be accessed to their fullest when they are applied across all aspects of your life. In other words, you will be prevented from moving into Captain

and Commander mode whenever you *don't* pay attention to what has your attention. It doesn't mean that all the things hooking your focus are equal in substance and potential meaning. Hardly. It does mean that you must responsibly unload and identify all of them in order to be able to address substance and meaning most effectively.

If in a staff meeting you are attempting to inspire your team with the new vision and mission statement of the company, but everyone in the room knows that a third of them are getting laid off next week, that unacknowledged elephant in the room will put such a cloud over the meeting that not only will your attempt at motivation be ineffective, you will lose major equity in terms of trust and leadership. Likewise, if you are attempting to set priorities for yourself and subliminally know that there are at least 43 things impinging on you that you have not yet tracked and managed, you'll resist the whole process and feel even guiltier than you did to begin with.

So, if you're not sure where to start, start with what *is*. Get it on the table. I have been in countless situations as a consultant, counselor, or coach where I didn't have the foggiest idea what I should or could do to assist the client or the team. And over the years I have learned that, without fail, one technique always yanked victory from the jaws of defeat. I just asked, in some form, appropriate to the situation, "OK, so what's true right now?"

That's also why the GTD model is so consistently successful. As opposed to putting forward an idealized starting point where you "should" start, we suggest that you begin with where you are. Very few people, when we ask them to capture what's on their mind, start off with, "Fulfill my destiny on the planet." Most begin with something like "Fix printer" or "Get babysitter for the weekend." If your destiny, or your strategic vision, or your ideal outcome for your mom's elder-care situation is the first thing on your mind, fabulous. Grab it. If it's not, and you really want to effectively identify and incorporate those higher-horizon commitments, you must start with what's taking up the space in front of them. More often than not that's 22 e-mails you've been avoiding, the sitter you need to arrange for your kids for tomorrow night, and buying cat food. If you don't deal with those effectively, they will undermine your recognition of the bigger stuff or at least diminish your ability to focus on them clearly.

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